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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1613
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000957

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA PROTESTS: QUIET TALKS ONGOING - WESTERN
SWING NOT LIVING UP TO BILLING

REF: TBILISI 0945

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: A small group of protesters locked the major roads on both sides of the river that flows through downtown Tbilisi for roughly 40 minutes May 21 prompting an angry response from motorists that was widely covered in the press. Non-parliamentary opposition rallies in Zugdidi and Kutaisi attracted minimal support, prompting Levan Gachechiladze to accuse citizens of Zugdidi of lacking courage. Using our good offices, the Ambassador arranged for a private meeting at his residence between Speaker Bakradze and David Usupashvili (Alliance - Republicans), a meeting which only a few in the GoG and even fewer in the non-parliamentary opposition are aware. During their meeting, Usupashvili and Bakradze found common ground on a number of issues including the risks associated with any escalation of the protests. (strictly protect). Also on May 21, the Ambassador announced the latest installment of USG assistance as part of the \$1 billion pledge, stressing the large percentage of this funding that will be used to support democratic reforms, political party development and free media. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: So far, the rallies in western Georgia have been underwhelming, and it does not appear that the non-parliamentary opposition will be able to bring many new supporters from the regions to the planned May 26 rally in Tbilisi. It also appears that a heretofore extremely patient public is starting to tire of the non-parliamentary oppositions' tactics. Despite what appear to be obvious signs that protests have run their course, the non-parliamentary opposition still seems unable to break out of its paralysis of thought, returning instead to counter-productive measures like blocking roads. Increasing signs of frustration are evident among certain non-parliamentary leaders who are now openly encouraging and engaging in confrontation. The non-parliamentary leaders who are open to dialogue seem unable to make a decision, while those pursuing a more radical course act quickly and decisively, essentially holding those with more moderate opinions hostage. We are concerned that this dynamic could lead to more provocative and confrontational tactics. End Comment.

Protests in West Georgia - Blocking Roads in Tbilisi

¶3. (C) In response to the MoIA's decision to impound cars following the May 19 blockage of the airport road, a group of about 200 protesters led by David Gamkrelidze (Alliance - New Rights) and Nino Burjanadze (United Movement - Democratic Georgia) closed the main river road in both directions for roughly 45 minutes. (Comment: The relevant Georgian law gives the MoIA the legal authority to impound vehicles that block roads. However, the MoIA also had the discretion to simply issue tickets. We believe the impounding of the cars while legal, was a clear sign to the non-parliamentary opposition that blocking major roads would not be tolerated. End Comment.) The press was full of pictures of and stories

about scuffles between irate motorists and protesters during the period of the blockage. One man pleaded to be able to get past to pick up his small children from school and was decried as selfish by protesters. Other residents around Rustaveli avenue are now speaking to the press complaining of protesters walking around drunk and relieving themselves on their property. Rustaveli Avenue business owners are telling journalists that they are near bankruptcy. Despite the increasing irritation, Gamkrelidze and Burjanadze vowed to take more confrontational steps.

14. (C) The protests in western Georgia, led by the brothers Gachechiladze, have produced only minimal crowds. Utsnobi's (Giorgi Gachechiladze) concerts are the more popular draw. Reportedly only about 100 hundred protesters showed up in Zugdidi for one rally, prompting Levan Gachechiladze to remark that the people of Zugdidi lacked courage. Utsnobi's concert in Kutaisi was better attended, but attracted nowhere near the numbers the non-parliamentary opposition had hoped (nor is it clear whether the attendees cared about the cause or just wanted to see a free concert). The non-parliamentary opposition has asked the Tbilisi mayor's office to extend the existing protest permit until June 26, and has indicated that it would widen the areas in which it would protest. (Note: The Mayor's Office has already extended the non-parliamentary opposition's protest permit three times. According to the press, the mayor's office did not comment on this latest notification. End Note.)

Bakradze - Usupashvili Meeting (Strictly Protect)

15. (C) Using his good offices, the Ambassador arrange for

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Speaker Bakradze and opposition leader Usupashvili to meet privately at his residence May 21. Both described the meeting to the Ambassador as positive. Each agreed that any escalation in protests carried great risks and also agreed to meet again after they spoke to their respective sides. Both indicated that there were substantial areas of agreement for dialogue. Usupashvili told the Ambassador that only seven non-parliamentary opposition leaders knew about the discussion and that this knowledge was limited to the top leadership in each of the respective parties. Bakradze and Usupashvili asked the Ambassador to keep the meeting confidential, fearing that any leaks could derail attempts at dialogue and compromise. The Ambassador offered his residence for further discussions if the parties desired.

U.S. Embassy Announces Aid Package

16. (U) The Ambassador announced the contents and transfer of USD 53.3 million as part of the USD 1 billion assistance pledge on May 21. The Ambassador explained that USD 20 million would be used for programs involving good governance, civic participation, election reform, and media reform, indicating our hope that this would support ongoing dialogue between the Government and opposition. The announcement received widespread positive press coverage, although there were no comments from the non-parliamentary opposition.

TEFFT